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SUBJECT: BELARUS WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - September 26, 2008

[1](#)1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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##### Civil Society -----

#### [1](#)2. Belarusian Christian Democrat Detained at Border

Belarusian border guards briefly detained Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCDP) Co-Chair Aleksey Shein on September 19. The guards searched Shein's personal belongings but did not confiscate anything. Shein maintained that the GOB has continuously hindered the BCDP's contacts with foreign partners and its international activities.

#### [1](#)3. Opposition Activist Banned from Foreign Travel

On September 24, Belarusian border guards took Sergey Vysotskiy, leader of the unregistered Party of Freedom, off a Kyiv-bound train. They detained him for two hours citing no official reasons or charges. Vysotskiy stated that he would appeal his travel ban to court.

#### [1](#)4. Opposition Hopeful Assaulted

An unidentified person in street clothes attacked opposition parliamentary hopeful Andrey Levinov in Vitebsk on September 22. As soon as Levinov stepped out of his apartment, he was brutally pushed from behind and pressed against the wall. Levinov reportedly suffered a minor head injury. He linked the assault with his political activities; nevertheless, he committed to continue running for the polls.

#### 15. Malady Front Leader Survives Car Crash

Malady Front Leader Artur Finkevich and his two colleagues survived a serious car crash on the way from Grodno to Minsk on September 20. The vehicle overturned three times at the speed of 100 km per hour after a wheel came off. Finkevich stressed the car had been properly maintained and checked shortly before the trip. He linked the accident with elevated pressure from the GOB on opposition youth saying their work could "bother" certain GOB elements.

#### 16. Opposition Youth Sentenced to Jail

A Gomel district court sentenced on September 24 the opposition youth activist Andrey Tenyuta to seven days in jail and a fine of USD 330. Police arrested Tenyuta on September 23 when he was about to board a Minsk-bound train and charged him with using obscenities and minor hooliganism. The judge did not announce the time of the hearing, and neither Tenyuta's family nor human rights advocates were able to attend.

#### 17. Independent Newspaper Called Extremist

An Ivye district court ruled on September 19 that the unregistered independent newspaper "Freedom" contained materials of "extremist nature" and should be outlawed. This precedent provides BKGB

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officers legal grounds for confiscation of copies and prosecution of persons in possession of copies. The Grodno office of the Belarusian KGB filed the case following numerous seizures of the newspaper issues from local opposition activists.

#### 18. Central Election Commission Disapproves Withdrawals

On September 24, Central Election Commission Chairwoman Lidiya Yermoshina expressed criticism regarding 10 parliamentary hopefuls who withdrew from the race. Yermoshina said they "harmed" the electoral campaign and let their supporters down. She announced that as of September 24, there were 265 candidates still running for the polls. According to the United Democratic Forces (UDF) press center, 66 UDF candidates remain in the race.

#### Domestic Economy

#### 19. National Bank Claims Belarus Unharmd by the World Financial Crisis

On September 22, Belarus' National Bank issued a press-release stating that the current turbulence in world financial markets poses no serious threat to the country's economy and banking sector. According to the announcement, the National Bank does not plan to react to the situation in any way, since the country's major economic and financial partners as well as Belarus' own economy and banking system are sufficiently stable and sound. Belarus reportedly possesses a well-established system to monitor international financial markets that mitigates emerging domestic and external risks. In contrast, independent observers believe that Belarus stayed relatively unharmd because the country's stocks are not traded internationally.

#### 10. 26 Percent of Belarusians are Receiving Pensions

According to the information provided to Ecopress news agency by Belarus' Labor Ministry September 24, as of July 1, the number of retired Belarusians is about 26 percent of the population (2.5 million out of 9.7 million). According to the country's labor code,

men and women retire at the age of 60 and 55 respectively. The average life expectancy for men is 64.5 years and 76.2 years for women. The government spends 11 percent of the country's GDP to pay minimal pensions to eligible Belarusian citizens.

#### ¶11. Belarus Ranks 151 in Transparency International Annual Corruption Rating

Ecopress news agency reported on September 23 that according to the latest Transparency International data, Belarus ranks 151st on the list of 180 countries rated for corruption. Belarus' corruption index is 2. Ukraine's and Russia's indices are 2.5 and 2.1 and these countries' ranks 134 and 147 respectively.

#### ----- Foreign Trade -----

#### ¶12. Belarus' Trade with Russia on the Rise (and so is the Trade Deficit)

An anonymous Economy Ministry official told the Ecopress news agency September 25 that Russia-Belarus trade through July grew on the year by 60 percent to USD 21.5 billion. Belarus' exports increased by 40.4 percent to USD 6.5 billion and imports rose 71 percent to USD 15 billion. Rapidly growing prices for oil, oil products and natural gas -- Russia's main exports to Belarus -- made the biggest contribution to the country's USD 1.7 billion plus deficit in foreign trade in goods and services that the GOB has routinely failed to curb this year.

#### ¶13. Seasonal Tariffs on Imported Vegetables Sky-Rocketed 50 to 180 Percent

According to various news agencies, President Lukashenka issued decree 523 September 18 introducing or greatly increasing seasonal tariffs on imported cucumbers (50 percent), tomatoes (50 percent), onions (180 percent), cabbages (75 percent), carrots (120 percent) and beetroots (150 percent). The edict came into effect September 22 and was allegedly intended to "safeguard the interests of Belarusian producers", whose produce was often more expensive than imported items.

#### ----- Quote of the Week -----

¶14. Answering questions of "Financial Times" and "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" reporters September 18, President Lukashenka said:

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"Yet, I do not have any plans to resign. It is not because, as you probably think, I want to be in power for ever. It is because my resignation in current situation could be viewed as treason. Even more than that, I do not understand why I should resign now. What happened to make me go now?"

MOORE  
LEADER